

SMALL TOWN BOY - Gerry McNeice (Own Label)



This guy's a bit of a local hero round West Yorkshire: though deservedly well regarded as a solo performer (singer, songwriter, guitarist, indeed multi-instrumentalist).

Gerry also leads his own four-piece band and augmented "orchestra" and plays stand-up bass with Duncan McFarlane's mighty acoustic outfit, yet in spite of all these activities he somehow maintains an unassuming profile.

Although Gerry's been around the music scene for some 25 years, with his expertise in great demand from fellow-musicians, it's only in the past five years that he's launched himself into a solo career path.

An early studio recording displayed Gerry's penchant and aptitude for intelligent experimentation, especially as regards texture and arrangement, while now on the brand-new album release, *Small Town Boy*, he combines that trait with his many other proven talents: characterful singing, skilled songwriting and fine all-round musicianship, all of which can be heard to good advantage on a thoughtful collection of songs that celebrate the best of contemporary acoustic writing with a handful of keen arrangements of traditional songs that (as a self-confessed nu-folkie!) he's recently discovered.

To help him realise the potential of these songs, Gerry has drawn around him a host of talented friends, mixing and matching the various musical colours as they drop in to assist. There's a real feel of willing collaboration, a genuinely enjoyable coming-together of enviably naturally talented muso-mates. These include members of his band (Katriona Gilmore on fiddle and mandolin, Ruth Wilde on double bass and Liam McNeice on guitar) and extended orchestra (Dom Howell on bodhrán and Jude Rees on oboe), while there are also key appearances from melodeonists Andy Cutting, Steve Fairholme and Pete Robinson, with backing vocals from Michelle Plum, fiddle from Marjorie Paterson and Jamie Roberts on trombone: stars every one of 'em!

Gerry's personal treatments of his chosen material are without exception genial and pleasing, but that evaluation should not be taken pejoratively, for he displays a real knack for communicating the essence of each song; it's rather that Gerry's performances are couched in a brilliantly likeable, listener-friendly

and thoroughly accessible nu-folk idiom that occasionally understates and belies its own keen depth of invention and imagination.

Gerry's own songs (just three on this disc, but there's plenty more on the stocks!) are simply- and memorably-expressed demonstrations of his acute empathy with the human condition, although their inspiration invariably derives from specific stories. These in turn can be based either on true events (Home is the tale of an American airman lost in training during WW2, whereas Danger Sign uses the much-documented local issue of the fence alongside the river Wharfe in Otley as a telling metaphor for other life experiences and concerns) or urban myths (The Legend Of Black Jack, a ghost who haunted a friend's farm).

Gerry also turns in affectionate and well-considered performances of songs penned by other songwriters: Katriona's I Know You (clearly inspired by Alison Krauss) receives a distinctive, sensitive reading that's quite different from that on Kat and Jamie's own 2006 EP, while Boo Hewerdine's limpid Wings On My Heels shows Gerry's persuasive way with that kind of nostalgic material.

For two of the album's songs, there's no other recorded comparison to hand: Shadow Of Skiddaw, which comes from the pen of Australian singer-songwriter Chris Aronsten, appealingly namechecks several locations from Gerry's (and mine own!) favourite part of the Lake District, while Circle (Round) For Danny is a lovely, evocative recent composition by Duncan McFarlane written for and about his own grandfather. Elsewhere: do we really need yet another version of Beeswing? A resounding yes, when it's as finely realised as Gerry's!...

He also manages to achieve a similar freshness of interpretive approach for other folkie-familiar fodder, here the traditional songs Flash Company, The White Cockade and Lezzie Lindsay, all of which he so beguilingly makes his own. In all these cases, Gerry's superlative renditions can proudly hold their own alongside those by illustrious "star names" of the folk scene; and his melodious take on Braw Sailing is a close match for Kris Drever's celebrated recent version, which can be taken as praise indeed.

As a singer, Gerry has a very pleasing vocal delivery, a gentle and light-textured but never unfeeling way of putting across a song, the total believability of which is only mildly compromised on isolated occasions by the slightly forced adoption of an "accent" (a Scottish burr on Circle For Danny and a rougher tone on some phrases of Flash Company).

Not only is Gerry a significantly accomplished instrumentalist (guitars, tenor guitar, bouzouki, banjo and basses), wearing his talents lightly and modestly, but he also has a great ear for effective blending of instrumental colour; each successive listen to this CD reveals playful and ingenious subtleties of individual parts that really enhance his own performances.

There's a lot going on in there: Gerry's a real craftsman in sound at times! And for the most part, the carefully-managed recording does Gerry's creative insights commendable justice, although there were times when I felt a touch of opaqueness in the overall texture, especially in the definition of bass lines and some minor clutter in the separation of other parts.

But these trifles matter little when set alongside the considerable achievements of the disc as a whole in accurately presenting the consummate nature of Gerry's talents and reflecting where Gerry is artistically right now. And it's top quality all the way - no wonder the guy's got so many friends!

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